The Impact of Internet Communications on Social Interaction

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Abstract

The Internet is clearly on the way to becoming an integral tool of business, communication, and popular culture in many parts of the world. Computer Mediated Communications (CMC) has a wide range of supporters and detractors. Some individuals argue the Internet will revolutionize social interactions, where others argue that the Internet will lead to loss of privacy, impersonal communications and isolation. There are also those who argue that the Internet is also being presented as a pedagogical tool for changing how public education is delivered. We believe that the Internet is a neutral social structural tool with several positive possibilities. However, the Internet's extraordinary growth is not without concern. Of particular relevance is the issue of the potential impact of the Internet and computer-mediated communications on the nature and quality of social interaction, especially among young people. This paper is an analysis of the possible consequences online communication might have on social interaction rituals. We focus on the current cyber-youth who have grown up with the Internet being a routine part of their everyday life and interaction rituals. A review of current research literature on online interaction and education use of the Internet reveals that in the United States a significant portion of youth's are actively using the Internet as an important form of social interaction. This article explores what possible positive and negative outcomes may arise from cyber-youth using the Internet as a primary means of social interaction and how that might influence their development of their interaction ritual skills.

Introduction

The Internet is clearly on the way to becoming an integral tool of business, communication, and popular culture, in the United States and in other parts of the world. The Internet is also being presented as a pedagogical tool for much of public education. However, its extraordinary growth is not without concern. Of particular relevance is the issue of the potential impact of the Internet and especially computer-mediated communications on the nature and quality of social interaction, among cyber-kids.

According to NetValue, people who chat online are among the heaviest users of the Internet (2002, Pg.1). Furthermore, 20 percent of female chatters are teenage girls. NetValue, Nielsen, and eMarketer (Ramsey, 2000) all conclude that while teenagers are not yet the dominant demographic of Internet users, their usage is growing very rapidly. Regardless of country of origin, recent data on Internet usage indicates that young people are becoming some of the heaviest users of the Internet (Nielsen, 2002 Pg.1). According to Nielsen (2002), 74 percent of United States residents between the ages of 12 and 18 are now using the Internet.

Among Internet users between 12 and 18, 35 percent spend 31-60 minutes per day online, and 44 percent spend more than an hour per day online. Indeed, almost 4 percent of these cyber-kids spend four or more hours online each day. America Online reported in their national survey of more than 6,700 teens and parents of teens that "fifty-six percent of teens (aged 18 to 19) prefer Internet to the telephone" (Pastore, 2002, Pg.1). The survey also reported that in order to keep up their communications with friends, more than 81 percent of teens use e-mail, while 70 percent use instant messaging.

Certainly, one can argue that online communication is not yet the dominant form of communication among young people. However, there is little question that the phenomenon of

online communication among teens and children is growing rapidly. Moreover, it is not hard to imagine a time in the near future when elementary and secondary school students may spend several hours a day doing schoolwork, communicating with friends, teachers, and family, and seeking entertainment, all via the computer and the Internet. It also follows, therefore, that substantial portions of students' experiences with interpersonal communications (especially with persons not already known to them) are likely to be computer-mediated. If children and teenagers are already using computers as a significant form of education, communication, and entertainment, it may well be that less time is being spent having face-to-face interactions with peers.

If the amount of time spent in face-to-face interactions among youth is shrinking, there may be significant consequences for their development of social skills and their presentation of self. Several decades ago, Goffman (1959 & 1967) suggested that individuals who lack the normative communication, cultural, and civility skills in a society would find it difficult to interact with others successfully. At the time, Goffman was, referring to the variety of visual and auditory cues that occur in face-to-face communications. Today, with computer-mediated communications, it is possible that none of the cues that Goffman wrote about may be present during online communication.

Some authors have already suggested that online behavior is different from offline behavior (Rheingold, 1993; Postman, 1992; Jones, 1995; Miller, 1996). Examples of such differences in behavior include individuals who are willing to misrepresent themselves by feigning a different gender, skin color, sexual orientation, physical condition, or age. Other differences in observed behaviors include the open display of group norm violations such as

aggressive behavior, racism, sexism, homophobia, personal attacks, harassment, and a tendency for individuals to quickly abandon groups and conversations, refusing to deal with issues they find difficult to immediately resolve. If these authors are correct, it is critical that the specific elements of interpersonal communication involved in computer-mediated interactions be identified and compared with face-to-face interactions. This paper examines the nature of Internet communications that take place among young people (particularly the elements of the presentation of self that do not occur, or occur with limited frequency), and suggests some potential consequences for the education and socialization of our youth.

Theories of Social Interaction

In **Asylums** (1961), Goffman described how small rituals have replaced the big rituals that occurred in traditional interpersonal relations. "What remains are brief rituals one individual performs for and to another, attesting to civility and good will on the performer's part and to the recipient's possession of a small patrimony of sacredness" (Goffman, 1961, Pg. 63). However, the choice of the particular set of rules an individual chooses to follow derives from requirements established in social encounters. Therefore, an individual's concept of self is shaped by the sum of the social interactions in which that individual engages.

Goffman (1967) further argues that the self is the actor in an ongoing play that responds to the judgments of others. While each individual has more than one role, he or she is saved from role strain by "audience segregation" that is, by employing multiple roles in their interactions with others. Because an individual can play a unique role in each social situation, that individual can effectively be a different person in each situation without contradiction. However, audience segregation regularly breaks down, and an individual can present a role

incompatible with ones presented on other occasions. In these situations, role strain occurs.

Children learn how to cope with such role strains through their own social experience and by watching others navigate social interactions that involve contradictory or competing roles. Indeed, Goffman argues that coping with role strain and developing impression management are necessary skills for the success of individuals in everyday social interactions. Children also must learn how to manage "front stage" and "back stage" behavior. The front stage is open to judgment by an audience, where the back stage is a place where actors can discuss, polish, or refine their performances without revealing themselves to the same audience. However, because there are multiple layers of front stages and back stages, individuals learn how much they can reveal to other characters.

All front stage roles contain a number of elements that are visual or auditory in nature including physical appearance (e.g., demographic characteristics, and physical features, such as size, make up, hairstyle, posture), manner of speaking (e.g., the use of standard vs. slang dialect, accents, regional vocabulary choices, and voice inflections), and the use of various props (e.g., clothing, car, and food preferences). Together, these elements help to create the role that is presented to others. However, individuals in face-to-face interactions not only present these more obvious indicators of their roles, they also give out more subtle cues such as posture, hand gestures, tone of voice, movement in a conversation, eye contact, and levels of social formality. Moreover, many of these indicators of role (both the obvious and the subtle) vary widely across groups.

However, in order to maintain a positive on-going relationship in any difficult face-to-face circumstance, an individual must learn the appropriate socialization rituals. Knowing these

rituals and being able to play a proper front stage role is crucial in order for an individual to get along with others. Indeed, the appearance of getting along with others is sometimes far more important than whether individuals actually like one another. Once again, it is difficult for individuals to succeed if they lack the proper social skills of the various groups with which they interact. Only with practice, will individuals develop and learn to improve their interaction skills, and develop a better presentation when communicating to individuals via their front and back stages.

Beyond Goffman

Collins (1981) describes how "emotional energies" -feelings of enthusiasm and confidence- can both be generated and diminished through social interaction. These energies in turn affect a range of collective outcomes, broadening people's mindsets and enabling effective coordination. Schreff (1990), Fredrickson (1998), and Quinn & Dutton (2001) all argue that Collins' theory suggests the emotions that emerge out of social interactions are extremely important in the development of any relationship. Schreff (1990) proposed "that a normal social bond involves what Goffman calls "reciprocal ratification" of each of the parties by the other as legitimate participants in the relationship"(pg. 9). Schreff (1990) and Cahill (1998) further argue that although Goffman was clearly thinking only of face-to-face interactions, his description is useful as a starting point for describing an intact social bond, regardless of whether the participants are co-present or not. Thus, the key idea in Schreff's analysis is legitimacy. Reciprocal ratification of each other's participation involves both feelings and actions of legitimation, and avoids conflict.

Tanis and Postmes (2003) argue that the limited capacity to detect body, language, and eye

cues inherent in computer mediated communications has negative consequences. For example, an individual in a face-to-face interaction may not want to admit to being embarrassed. However, his/her red face may help others recognize the situation. When people recognize the cue, they can choose to change the course of the conversation or try to create some form of atonement to make the embarrassed individual feel better. According to Schreff (1990), because of such emotions, individuals in a shared space have to try to make things work in order to salvage the relationship, at the same time relieving stress.

Online Interaction

From the beginning of the Internet, it was clear that the interaction taking place online was a new form of social interaction. What was not clear, and still is to be determined, are the consequences of this new form of social interaction. The Internet itself is neither negative nor positive. It is inanimate, an object or a tool that can be used in various ways. To reify the Internet and suggest that it is somehow inherently liberating or enslaving is misleading. Nevertheless, it is important to look at how interaction on the Internet differs from other forms of interaction. These differences may play havoc with traditional social interaction rituals.

Some authors believe the Internet will revolutionize social interactions, politics, communities, or society. One argument is that the Internet allows ideas to circulate to a wide audience and thus helps entrepreneurs with good ideas find capital and bring expertise to bear on marketable products and services (Cairncross, 1997). Others make the case that Internet technologies may help flatten hierarchies (Sproull and Kiesler, 1992), dilute power from traditional elites who monopolize information (Moore, 1987), permit new and interesting forms of community (Etzioni, 1997), make citizen activism easier and more effective (Schwartz, 1996),

and encourage a generally self-reflective society (Dizard, 1997; Fishkin 1992). Other authors provide a dark side to online interactions, arguing online interactions lead to dysfunctional behavior, a lack of community, less privacy, a weakened democracy, and social isolation. Examples of such perspectives include Cohill & Kavanaugh (2000), Nie & Erbring (2002), and Putnam (2000).

The majority of the research work on online interaction attempts to offer a balanced perspective between the positive and negative potential consequences. Examples of such work include Wellman & Haythornthwaite (2002), Katz & Rice (2002), Rheingold (2000), Wellman & Gulia, and Jones (1995). We tend to agree with the position that computer mediated communications have some exciting and positive applications to social interactions. However, every newly adopted cultural mechanism has the potential to impact everyday "normal" social relations. As with any social change, we also believe there is a need to study and understand the impacts that change might have, regardless of whether such changes are viewed as positive or negative.

In his conversations with other virtual communities, Rheingold (1993) reported that it was often difficult for individuals to accurately communicate the intent behind the words they typed without the use of their usual repertoire of visual/aural social cues (indeed, emoticons have been one way people have tried to simulate some of those cues). Thus, when a problem did arise, the solution frequently included leaving the chat room, turning off the computer, or starting a flame war. In addition, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2001), many teens (and others) currently manipulate their online identities, pretending to be different people and giving false information to people they communicate with online. There seems to be a sort

of social freedom in the ability of an individual to misrepresent his/her identity in online communications. Indeed, according to Waskul and Douglass (1997), a "cyberself" emerges.

Where such misrepresentations occur, and are discovered, they give the individual little practice on how to maintain stable relationships in the real versus the virtual world. Unlike face-to-face interactions, computer mediated interactions rarely provide much opportunity to practice the face-saving practices that Goffman and Scheff (1990) believe help society function smoothly. According to Rheingold (1993), individuals online are more likely to respond in a quick and spontaneous manner. There is no shared physical space to disrupt, there is no implicit social contract, and there are few social interaction rituals to prevent individuals from being rude when delivering their responses.

On the other hand according to Althusser (1971), there is the possibility individuals will start to prefer online communications because it is an icon of the modern world. If individuals move to use online forms of interaction as the primary way to communicate the rules of online communication will begin to compete with and perhaps dominate those of face-to-face social interactions. For contemporary adults, this should not be problematic. They should have sufficient face-to-face interaction skills for them to move among the different modes of communication. However, this may not be the case with some cyber-kids who have not properly developed their face-to-face interaction skills. Consequently, they may have problems when engaging in real face-to-face interactions.

Tapscott (1998) suggests that children and teens can become more actively involved when using the Internet to communicate. However, responding directly to Goffman, Tapscott argues that on the Internet, all of the elements of the front stage must be constructed completely

by the participants. Thus, online front stages provide an indefinite number of possibilities for the child to create a self, or many selves, which appear to work in a given situation. What Tapscott is suggesting by this is that children who communicate online may not fully come to terms with the differences between front stage and back stage presentations. Why trust whether someone is telling you the truth about himself or herself when you do not tell them the truth about yourself? In the end, there is no way of knowing the accuracy of an online presentation of self until a face-to-face interaction can verify or contradict it. Tapscott does argue that children who participate in online interactions improve their imagination and their cognitive and intellectual capabilities. However, avoiding reality when engaging in primary interactions means that individuals also avoid the necessary practice of social interaction rituals. Instead of learning the interaction skills they are learning how to deceive individuals about who they really are.

Similarly, Feenberg (1999) states that the quality of online discussions he had with students surpassed "anything I have been able to stimulate in my face-to-face classroom" (Pg.1). He further argues that online communications improve the communication skills of students who normally are shy or resigned to not talk in class. Others (Kerrey & Isakson, 2001; Daugherty, Grubb, Hirsch, Gillis, 2000; Gillani, 2000; Testa, 2000; Navarro, 2000; and Russell, 1999) agree that online classes bring with them more frequent amounts and higher quality levels of communication when compared to their traditional classrooms. Yet other studies have found that students do not communicate either more effectively or more frequently online (Hara, 2000; Martin, 1999; Al-Kodmany, George, Marks, Skach, 1999; Apple, Jungck, 1998; and Cuban, 1986). Clearly, the jury is still out on this issue.

Because online interaction is different, it is entirely possible that children with high levels

of online interactions would adopt different techniques of social interaction. Several authors such as LaRose, Eastin, and Greeg (2001), Schmitz (1997) cultivate the notion that for many individuals, online communication helps facilitate face-to-face communications with current relationships and sometimes with new relationships. Boyd and Walter (2002) even argue that Internet social support is superior to face-to-face social support. According to them, online social support offers benefits that face-to-face social networks cannot: anonymity, constant access to better quality expertise, and enhanced modes of expression, with less chance of embarrassment and without incurring an obligation to the support provider. However, Spears and Lea (1992) argue that the absence of social and contextual cues undermine the perception of leadership, status, and power, and leads to reduced impact of social norms and therefore to deregulated, anti-normative behavior.

The Impact of Internet Communications

Our fundamental position is that online social interaction is one form of role-play, and thus an element in the development of the self. Moreover, if a substantial amount of communication is accomplished online, either at home, at school, or elsewhere, children and cyber-kids are likely to develop the skills necessary for online interaction, but they are also likely to lack some of the skills that are involved in face-to-face interaction.

Tapscott (1998) claims that the children of the Internet generation are already way ahead of their parents and many other adults (who do not yet understand what the Internet is or how it works). However, Tapscott and others may have made a crucial mistake in their logic. They have forgotten that political and economic power are in the hands of adults. Therefore, the members of the cyber-kid generation must understand, adapt, and modify their interactions in

order to get along in society.

Moreover, if students develop unique interaction rituals based on online communication without enough experience or understanding of traditional face-to-face interaction rituals, the likelihood for friction and/or conflict to occur undoubtedly increases. Such youths may be perceived as rude, insolent, disconnected, spoiled, or apathetic. It can be argued that new cultural and social phenomena have typically produced tensions between the generations. However, not having the skills or the knowledge of how to communicate with people who have different values and attitudes complicates the traditional struggles between youth and their elders. Furthermore, such rifts will not only be between the young and the old, but between any groups that are different from one another.

The very components that Tapscott (1998) and Waskul and Douglass (1997) propose as the quality aspects of online interaction would spell certain trouble in many face-to-face interactions: anonymity, lack of role strain, multiple projected images of oneself, multiple front stages, the lack of a collective social contract, the ability to play multiple social roles, and the lack of necessity to deal with individuals or groups with which one does not agree. For example, if a young boy in a public school were accused of having told various teachers contradictory stories about his background, refusing to interact with his peers that did not share the same interests, giving up on school topics that are of no interest to him, and talking to people while the teacher is talking, he would be labeled as troubled and a likely candidate for counseling or punishment. Yet, all of these behaviors would be acceptable (or at least tolerated) in an online environment.

The skills and lessons of socialization that students need to learn in order to cope in

everyday life, however, cannot be manufactured by computer simulations or video games (at least not yet). Classrooms with computers hooked up to the Internet predispose students to work as individuals rather than as members of any social group. Although students can interact with others when they are on the Internet, they are often able to choose with whom they wish to interact and how they want to manage it. Even if the students are interacting with fellow classmates while online, is it not reasonable that the use of a computer in mediating those interactions will alter the interaction rituals in which they engage?

We argue that the best critiques of the possible pitfalls are often the individuals cited as being most supportive of online interaction. For example, Jones (1995) Jones (1995) warns "everywhere we go we can tap into that community with a cell phone, a personal digital assistant, a modem, or a satellite dish. But connection does not inherently make for community, nor does it lead to any necessary exchanges of information, meaning, and sense making at all" (Pg. 12). Similarly, Rheingold (1993) warns that "when the technology itself grows powerful enough to make the illusions increasingly realistic, as the Net promises to do within the next ten to twenty years, the necessity for continuing to question reality grows even more acute" (Pg. 299).

Discussion

Given that we know so little about the nature of the social interactions that take place over the Internet, not only but especially by youth, it is clear that much research is needed. One obvious arena would include studies of young children followed over time to determine if there are recognizable online interaction rituals and what consequences they may have on the social development of the children. There is a growing body of research on this general issue –

whether computer-mediated communications "displace" more traditional face-to-face forms of communication. A special issue of *IT & Society* recently focused on it, reporting the results of a number of time-diary studies in the United States and elsewhere. However, the conclusions are mixed. Some studies have found reduced levels of time spent with friends and family (Nie, Hillygus, 2002; Pronovost, 2002; Nie, Erbring, 2002). Others have either reported no difference (Kestinbaum, et.al., 2002; Gershny, 2002) or increased levels of sociability among Internet users (Neustadl, Robinson, 2002;Kriesler, et. Al., 2002).

We agree with Wellman and Gulia (1999) that "the internet… is not a separate reality. People bring to their online interactions such baggage as their gender, stage in the life cycle, cultural milieu, socioeconomic status, and offline connections with others"(Pg. 3). Online and face-to-face social interactions share some elements, and many individuals interact using both forms of communication.

This discussion is not about the members of the current generations who have grown up with the Internet. It is about future generations where the Internet is used as a primary source of communication, the focal center of school-work and research, the main source of entertainment, and the primary medium for the development of contemporary issues. If the strength of the Internet of the future is the fact that individuals can choose with whom they want to interact, then it may also be one of the Internet's weaknesses when it comes to the development of social interaction skills. The demands of learning to get along with others are likely to become drowned out by self-interested pursuits. The possibility of a narrow world perspective seems certain for those individuals who choose to isolate themselves from people and ideas with whom they feel uncomfortable. If the easiest solution to avoid dissonance is to avoid situations that

produce it, then the potential for an unrealistic social process is high. We are not opposing or supporting computer mediated communications or the Internet in schools. We are simply suggesting that it is important to assess the social impacts of the Internet while the frequency of use is still relatively low. Once they become ubiquitous, the possibility of such research has been forever lost.

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